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Up and Down the Hindu Kush

The Hindu Kush rises high above the plains and valleys of Afghanistan. Over the millennia these majestic mountains have looked down upon peaceful farmers and wandering pastoralists, upon the armies of Alexander the Great and Chingiz-Khan, upon traders and pilgrims, and in recent years upon multitudes of disparate foreign diplomats who have tried to bring peace to this war-torn country. Whatever these men and women accomplished in Afghanistan, not far off there always loomed the towering height of the Hindu Kush. Thousands of years ago the ancient Iranians called this range the **upâ'ri saêna*, or (*kôf-i*) *apârsên*, '(the mountains) above the falcon', or in other words, 'mountains that rise higher than a bird can fly'.¹ In the late first millennium BC, the Greeks correspondingly used the name of the *Paropanisadae* to indicate the plains that stretch immediately southeast of the mountains, around the modern capital of Kabul.² The Classical name probably derives from Iranian **para-upâ'risaêna*, which should mean something like 'the land which lies beyond the *upâ'risaêna*' and thus indicating a name given by people who lived on the other, northern side of the mountains. In the early seventh century of the modern era, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang, while travelling through Afghanistan on his way from China to the Indian subcontinent and back again, used the name of *Poluoxina* to describe the mountains north of Kabul.³ The appellation recalls the Old Iranian name, and in his *Records* the

1 The identity of the (Old Iranian, Avestan) *Saêna M^ar²ya* ('Saena bird', eagle, falcon?) remains unknown. In later Iranian mythology it is referred to as the *Simurgh* (Middle Persian *Sênmurv*); compare Bartholomae 1904:398 and Monchi-Zadeh 1975:128.

2 A western offshoot of the Hindu Kush, north and northeast of Herat, is still known as the Paropamisus Range by western geographers.

3 Translation of the *Si-Yu-Ki, Buddhist Records of the Western World*, by Samuel Beal (1884: II, 286).



Illustration 1 *Group of Afghan Mujahedin, summer 1982 (photograph: author).*

pilgrim unwittingly illustrates this point by telling that ‘[t]he very birds that fly in their wheeling flight cannot mount alone this point, but go afoot across the height and then fly downwards’.

The Hindu Kush is an offshoot of the Himalayas. In its widest sense the name covers much of the rugged centre and northeast of Afghanistan. The mountains affect the country’s climate, the quality of its soil, the availability of water and its routes of communication. In this way, the Hindu Kush constitutes a constant factor in the life of the people who make a living along its flanks and in the surrounding plains. It is a difficult life, in a harsh and often cruel environment, with cold winters and hot summers. In some areas there is plenty of water, while other places receive hardly any precipitation at all. Sometimes, as at the time of writing this book, it does not rain for years on end, causing immense suffering and great overall damage. The average life expectancy for Afghan men and women is consequently very low; the CIA factbook for the year 2000 gives an estimate of 45.88 years.⁴

Although producing relatively little and forcing people into a constant struggle against the environment, the country is also singularly unique and full of potential, which is mainly due to its geographical position. The people of Afghanistan live along one of the most important high roads of Asia (Ill. 1). Their country constitutes the con-

4 CIA factbook www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/af.html

necting link between the steppes and deserts of Central Asia, the vast expanses of the Middle East and Iran, and the lush plains and sweltering heat of the Indian subcontinent. Throughout history, immigrants from neighbouring lands moved into and across the mountains and passes of Afghanistan, traversing the country from all sides. They all left their traces, and their descendants, and thus created the mosaic of ethnic groups that characterizes the country's present population.

Contacts with the outside world, however, were never one-sided. Time and again, the hardened men from Afghanistan moved from their mountains down into the surrounding plains and deserts, for grazing, trade or plunder. They defeated kingdoms and founded empires. In this way, the history of the people of Afghanistan is also the history of those who live beyond its modern borders.

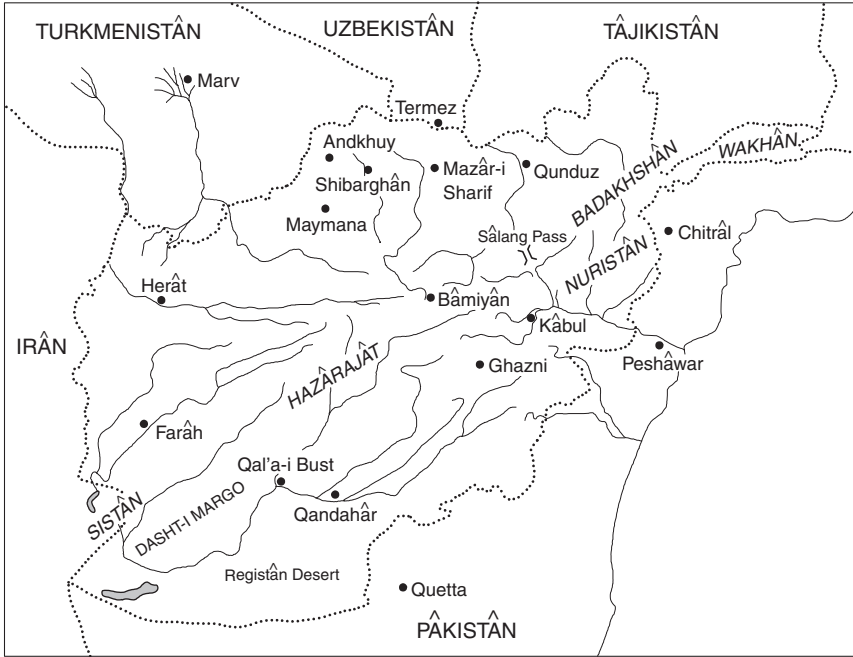
Against this environmental and geographical backdrop, the people of Afghanistan have woven a web of shared customs, beliefs, and techniques, and with a comparable outlook on life. This web justifies the writing of a book on the history of the Afghans as a single group distinct from neighbouring peoples, even if the name 'Afghan' really only applies to one of the peoples that inhabit the country. These are the Pashtuns, who for centuries have constituted the dominant ethnic group of Afghanistan and who live mainly in the south and east of the country and in neighbouring Pakistan. It also means that in order to understand the people of Afghanistan and their history, it is necessary to know something about the physical environment that made the Afghans into what they are now.

Present-day Afghanistan

The modern Islamic State of Afghanistan (*Dawlat-i Islâmi-yi Afghânistân*)⁵ is a landlocked country of 647,500 square km (Map 1) and is therefore somewhat larger than France.⁶ In the south and east, over a distance of 2,430 km, it borders on Pakistan. In the northeast, high in the mountains, it shares a very short boundary (76 km) with China. Two northern neighbouring countries are Tajikistan (1,206 km) and Uzbekistan (137 km). In the northwest lies Turkmenistan (744 km), and to the west Afghanistan is bounded by the Islamic Republic of Iran (936 km). Estimates of Afghanistan's present population are notoriously vague. In 1978, experts accepted a figure

5 The Taliban movement, presently in control of most of the country including the capital Kabul, describes the country as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

6 CIA factbook.



Map 1 *The main cities and districts of Afghanistan.*

of some fifteen million. Following the communist coup of 27 April 1978, and especially after the invasion of the country by Soviet forces at Christmas 1979, some five million refugees fled the country. Hundreds of thousands died during the war (Ill. 2), which continued after the Soviet withdrawal that was completed on 15 February 1989. The number of refugees who have since then returned to their country is unknown, nor are there clear figures of new refugees trying to escape the internecine wars that dominate modern politics. The CIA factbook for 2000 gives estimates of some 1,200,000 Afghans still remaining in Pakistan, and some 1,400,000 in Iran. Yet what is clear is that in spite of all the upheaval, the population of Afghanistan has in fact increased considerably and estimates indicate a figure of almost 26 million for mid-2000. However, reliable information and figures are absent and the present description of Afghanistan and its population is therefore mainly based on the pre-1979 situation.

Almost all of the modern frontiers of Afghanistan were formally defined and acknowledged in the late nineteenth century. Most of the

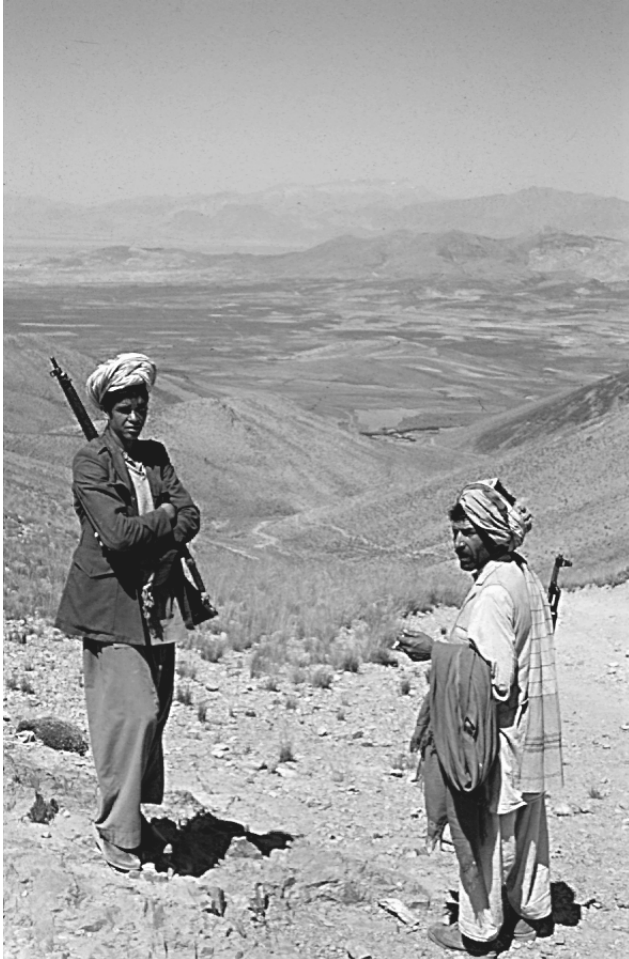
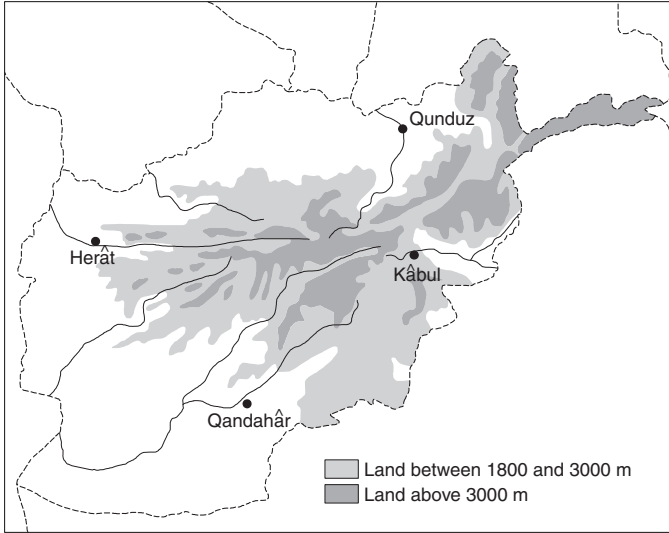
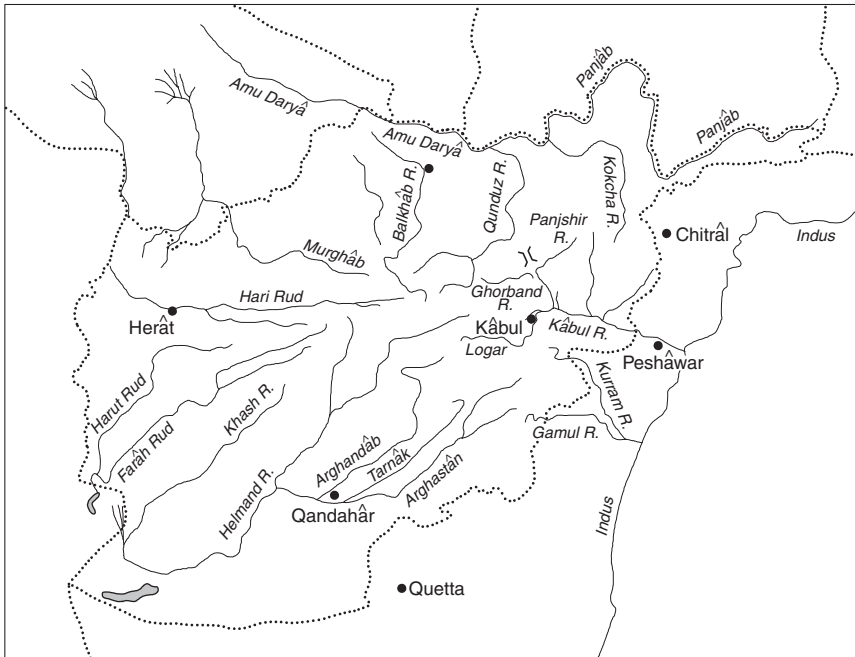


Illustration 2 Two Afghan Mujahedin on their way from Ghazni to Hazarajat, summer 1982 (photograph: author).

borders were not pegged out along clear geographical features, or on the basis of long-accepted historical traditions. Instead, political and military considerations by the superpowers of those days determined the course of the frontiers. Hence, in the days when European powers controlled most of the globe, British and Russian boundary commissions traversed this part of the world in order to mark Afghanistan's outer contours. They intentionally separated the British possessions in the Indian subcontinent from the Russian conquests in Central



Map 2 *The mountains of Afghanistan.*



Map 3 *The main rivers of Afghanistan.*

Asia.⁷ These were the years of the Great Game between Russia and England, so well described by Rudyard Kipling in his book, *Kim*. In those years, the state of Afghanistan under Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901) was eventually acknowledged, not as an independent country, but as a buffer state within the British sphere of influence. It was formed to prevent any British soldier from directly facing his Russian opponent. For this reason, the borders of modern Afghanistan often cut straight through traditional tribal lands. This is especially the case in the east, where the lands of the Pashtuns are divided by the so-called Durand line of 1893.⁸ Elsewhere, in the southwest, the borderline defined in 1872 and again in 1904,⁹ splits up an isolated area of potentially fertile lands (Sistan) between Afghanistan and Iran. Only in the northeast does the modern border follow a plain geographical feature, namely the Panj river (the Panjab) and its continuation, the Amu Darya (the Oxus of Classical authors).¹⁰

The Hindu Kush Mountains

The Hindu Kush mountains cover most of the northeastern and central parts of the country (Map 2). It extends in a southwestern direction from a mountain knot in the far northeast, where the modern borders of Afghanistan meet those of Tajikistan, China and Pakistan. This mountain knot is generally known as the Qara Qorum (Turk. ‘Black Rubble’) and by itself constitutes the most northwestern limit of the Himalaya Range. Here the mountains are extremely high, rising to altitudes of over 7,000 metres. Further southwest and down towards Central Afghanistan the mountains slowly diminish in height, but the adjoining Kuh-i Baba Range, to the west of the capital Kabul, is still more than 5,000 metres high.¹¹

7 Compare Hungerford Holdich (1901; 1910). Another interesting account is by C. C. Davies 1932. For the so-called Great Game, see especially the books by Peter Hopkirk.

8 Named after Sir Henry Mortimer Durand (1850–1924), at that time Foreign Secretary of the Government of (British) India (1884–94).

9 In September 1904, the Persians and Afghans were made to accept the lines drawn by Colonel A. H. McMahon. The lines of 1904 mostly follow those of 1872, drawn by General Sir Frederic Goldsmid (see Hamilton 1906). The distribution of the water of the Hilmand river remained a problem, which was only solved in 1973 with the Hilmand Water Treaty, which was ratified by the Afghan government in 1977.

10 The Classical name of the Oxus lives on in that of the Wakhsh river, a tributary of the Panj/Amu Darya. The confluence of these rivers actually marks the place where the Panj river changes its name and becomes the Amu Darya. See B. Spuler in the *Enc. Isl.* (Amu Darya).

11 The Shah Fuladi peak rises to a height of 5,158 metres.



Illustration 3 *The lakes of Band-i Amir in Central Afghanistan (photograph: author, summer 1978).*

The mountains of the Kuh-i Baba and its offshoots mark the origin of most of Afghanistan's major rivers (Ill. 3).¹² These are the Surkhab (or Qunduz river), the Balkhab, the Hari Rud, the Hilmand, the Arghandab, and the Kabul rivers (Map 3). The Surkhab or Qunduz river flows north past the city of Qunduz towards the Amu Darya. The Balkhab, somewhat further to the west, also descends north and flows towards and past Balkh, ancient Bactra, but its waters are drained off and evaporate before they reach the Amu Darya. The Hari Rud goes west and passes the town of Herat and then turns north (as the Tajand river) to empty into the Qara Qum desert of modern Turkmenistan. The Hilmand flows southwest through the deserts of Southwest Afghanistan until it empties its waters in the depression of Sistan. This is the so-called Hilmand Hamun, which also receives the waters of a number of minor rivers that descend down the mountains of Central Afghanistan, including the Khash Rud, the Farah Rud and the Harut Rud. Occasionally the Hilmand Hamun overflows and its excess water then flows via the Shilagh channel southwards towards another large depression nearby, called the Gud-i Zirah. The main tributary of the Hilmand is the Arghandab, which also originates near the Kuh-i Baba range and

12 Compare a passage in the Iranian (Middle Persian) *Bundahishn* (ed. Anklesaria 87,11–88.3), in which it is stated that the *Hêtomand*, *Harêw*, *Marw* and *Balkh* originate in the *Apârsên* mountains.

flows east of the Hilmand, passes the town of Qandahar (Pashto: Kandahar) in the south of the country and then joins the Hilmand at the ancient site of (Qal'a-i) Bust. The Kabul river proceeds east, past the city of Kabul, and after receiving the waters of a series of tributaries flows towards the Indus.

All of these mountains, which separate the north of the country from the south, are generally known, since at least the early fourteenth century, as the Hindu Kush ('Hindu-killer'). The Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta (AD 1304–77), who visited this part of the world in the early 1330s, tells us '[t]he mountain is called Hindu Kush, which means "Slayer of Indians", because the slave boys and girls who are brought from India die there in large numbers as a result of the extreme cold and the quantity of snow'.¹³

The name of the Hindu Kush, however, should only really be applied to that part of the mountains that rises immediately north of Kabul. Here the mountain range is at its narrowest and allows for traffic to proceed via either of a series of passes.¹⁴ In fact, the name was perhaps originally only used for one of these thoroughfares, although we do not know which one. At present, the main pass across the Hindu Kush is the Salang Pass and Tunnel. It directly connects the north of the country with the south and the country's capital, Kabul. The modern road crosses the mountains at a height of 3,363 metres. Built under Soviet supervision between 1956 and 1964 it replaced a lengthy and circuitous route west of Kabul via the Shibar Pass, close to the Bamiyan Valley.¹⁵ Another, but at present much less frequented route between north and south leads east of the Salang, through the Panjshir valley.¹⁶

13 Ibn Battuta III 84. Translation by Routledge 1929:178. The name may also be a corruption of *Hindu Kuh* (Mountain of Hindu). Compare Dupree 1980:1.

14 Compare Grötzbach 1990:240–141. Babur, the Mughal conqueror of India in the early sixteenth century, lists seven passes of the Hindu Kush (*Bâburnâme*, trans. by Beveridge 1922:204–5).

15 Traditionally there were two main routes from Kabul to Bamiyan. The first goes north from Kabul and turns to the west along the Ghorband river and crosses the Shibar Pass (2,987 m). The other route leads west from Kabul and crosses two passes, namely the Unay Pass (3,354 m) and the Hajigak (3,567 m) or Iraq Pass (3,963 m). From the Bamiyan valley, the ancient road proceeds north via the Aq Ribat Pass (3,117 m) and the Dandan Shikan Pass (2,744 m). A modern track, built with the help of German engineers and opened in 1933, leads north from just west of the Shibar Pass, along the Bamiyan river, to Doab-i Mekhzarin and hence down into the plains of North Afghanistan.

16 This route crosses the mountains via the Khawak Pass. Traditionally (but without any evidence) this is the route thought to have been followed by Alexander the Great in the spring of 329 BC when he led his army from the Kabul valley across the mountains to the north (compare Wood 1997:142–4).



Map 4 *Afghanistan in Southwest Asia.*

Afghanistan's Position in Southwest Asia

The modern state of Afghanistan and the adjoining foothills of Pakistan constitute the eastern part of the Iranian Plateau (Map 4). This highland zone extends from the Zagros Range in the west (along the modern Iran–Iraq border) to the banks of the Indus river in the east. It forms the connecting link between the Near East, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent and throughout history it has been the thoroughfare for migrants from Central Asia in the north to the Near East in the southwest or the Indian subcontinent in the southeast.

The easiest route from the deserts and semi-deserts of South Central Asia onto the Iranian Plateau leads via a gap in the mountain chain that bounds the Iranian Plateau in the north. This break lies between the cities of Mashhad in modern Northeast Iran and Herat in West Afghanistan. The north–south route via the so-called Herat corridor links up with the two major east–west roads that traverse the Plateau. The course of these two routes is determined by the availability of food and water. Huge deserts, namely the Dasht-i Kavir in the north and the adjoining Dasht-i Lut in the south, dominate the centre of modern Iran and the Iranian Plateau. These wastelands constitute an enormous barrier and consequently any

east–west traffic either has to proceed north or south of these empty expanses.

The northern route passes along the small strip of inhabitable land between the central deserts of Iran and the Elburz Mountains, which form the northern part of the mountain ring that surrounds the Plateau. This northern route leads from the west, past modern Tehran, to the city of Mashhad. From here the traveller may continue to Central Asia and the ancient towns of Bukhara, Samarqand and places beyond. This is the historical Silk Road and also the course of a modern railway link. From Mashhad, a secondary route leads southeast to Afghanistan, in particular to the old staging post of Herat. Leaving this ancient place the traveller may continue to northern Afghanistan and hence cross the Hindu Kush to Kabul and the valley of the Indus. He may also go south, towards the province of Sistan, along the Iran/Pakistan/Afghanistan border, or southeast towards the city of Qandahar. From Qandahar the traveller continues eastwards towards the Middle Indus valley, or northeastwards, towards Ghazni and the Kabul valley.

The southern route across the Iranian Plateau leads from southern Iran to the drainage basin of the Hilmand River in Sistan. From here, it proceeds via Qandahar to the Indus valley in the east, or the Kabul plain in the northeast. Another southern overland route, which bypasses Afghanistan to the south, leads through Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan. The importance of this particular route has always been minimal because of the harsh conditions along the way. Alexander the Great followed this route in the opposite direction, thereby almost losing his life and his army.¹⁷

Before the age of mechanized transport, travelling across the Iranian Plateau usually was an undertaking that took weeks or even months. Until comparatively recently, wheeled transport was virtually unknown. Horses, camels, donkeys and ponies provided the main means of transport. The average distance covered by a caravan amounted to about 35 km per day, depending upon the terrain. The maximum daily distance for small groups of horse riders was about 60 km.¹⁸ The distance between Kabul and Qandahar, some 500 km, took some fifteen days. Large army groups travelled even more slowly. In the summer of 1880, a large British military column covered the distance between Kabul and Qandahar in twenty days, which, it should be added, was regarded as being extremely fast.¹⁹

17 Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* VI 21ff.

18 In the nineteenth century, Baluch robbers on camels could ride up to 120 km or more per day (Marvin 1885:354).

19 The famous march of General Sir Frederick Roberts (1832–1914) in August 1880, during the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

The Natural Environment

Afghanistan forms part of an arid, semi-desert belt of lands that extends across much of the Iranian Plateau.²⁰ Dry, hot summers and cold winters with much snow are permanent features. In the winter, snow covers most of the mountains from about 1,800 metres upwards. In March the snow begins to melt and the rivers rise. The rivers in Afghanistan therefore carry the maximum amount of water during the spring, causing occasional floodings. Apart from these constant features, the climatic variations in Afghanistan are enormous, not in the least because the north of the country lies open to the cold winds from Central Asia, while the lands southeast of the mountains are affected by the Indian monsoon. Precipitation ranges from an annual average of 75 mm in the extremely dry southwest of the country to 213 mm in Mazar-i Sharif (the main city of North Afghanistan), 328 mm in the eastern town of Ghazni, and an excessive 1,150 mm high up in the Salang Pass.²¹

The vegetation of the country is equally diverse. In the east, around the modern town of Jalalabad at an altitude of 552 metres, the vegetation is subtropical, even allowing for some palm trees. Some 100 km to the west, much higher up along the Kabul valley but still south of the Hindu Kush mountains, vegetation is very different. Kabul itself lies at an altitude of 1,803 metres and here the trees include the oak, walnut, alder, ash and juniper. North of the mountains, the sand and loess covered lands support steppe vegetation and, if properly watered, yield rich agricultural crops. In South and West Afghanistan vegetation is minimal. Here the landscape is dominated by the so-called *dasht*, the stony desert which is typical for much of the Iranian Plateau,²² or by sandy wastes (the *reg*), as for instance the Registan desert of South Afghanistan.²³

Forests used to be found in the extreme east of the country, along the borders with Pakistan, but recent unchecked deforestation has changed all this. The forests of the Panjshir valley, still known in the Middle Ages, have also disappeared. Large forests can still be found in the more secluded districts of Nuristan, northeast of modern Kabul.

20 For the climate and vegetation of Afghanistan, see Dupree 1980:3ff.; Humlum 1959; Kraus 1975:32ff.

21 Compare Rathjens 1975:41.

22 Defined by Fisher 1968:93 as: 'relatively firm and dry desert, composed of generally small and compacted rock fragments: pebbles, flints, or, most often, silts.'

23 A *rig* or *reg* refers to finer deposits, usually of sand, which may be in regular dune formation or irregularly deposited as a variable sheet (Fisher 1968:93).

Wildlife in Afghanistan is limited.²⁴ Tigers, which used to roam the banks of the Amu Darya, the shores of the inland lakes of Sistan and until very recently the foothills around Jalalabad in the east, have disappeared. So have the lions.²⁵ However, eagles, foxes, gazelles, hyenas, jackalls and wolves can still be found. Wild asses and wild boars were known until very recent times. High up in the Qara Qorum and Hindu Kush there are snow leopards, wild goats, as for instance the markhor and the ibex, and wild sheep (including the argali or Marco Polo sheep).

Throughout history, Afghanistan has been a supplier of coveted minerals.²⁶ Famous are the deposits of lapis lazuli (*Fârsi: Lâjaward* or *Lâjward*) near Sar-i Sang in the valley of the Kokcha river, in the northeast of the country.²⁷ Recently, lapis lazuli has also been reported from the Chagai hills west of Quetta along the Afghan/Pakistan border.²⁸ Lapis is found at only a few places on earth, and the Afghan mines, and in particular those in Badakhshan, seem to have been exploited from a very early date onwards. From the late fourth millennium BC, this semi-precious stone was exported to the surrounding lands, as far as Egypt. Equally important are the copper deposits at many places in the country, especially in the Logar valley south of Kabul; at some places southwest of Herat; along the Arghandab river north of Qandahar, and near Andarab north of the Panjshir valley. Also important, especially for the production of bronze, are the tin deposits to the southwest of Herat. Gold is found near Muqqur, northeast of Qandahar, and in the rivers of Badakhshan. Huge deposits of iron ore are found near the Hajigak Pass, west of Kabul. The natural gas reserves from near Shibarghan and Sar-i Pul, in the northwest of the country, were exploited since the late 1960s for export to the north.

Agriculture and Nomadism

Only about 12 per cent of the total surface of Afghanistan is cultivated. Of this total, some 20 per cent is suitable for dry farming.

24 Compare Elphinstone 1815:141–5.

25 Marco Polo, ed. Latham 1958:75, refers to their presence in medieval North Afghanistan.

26 Compare Grötzbach 1990:52–5. The famous Balas rubies, named after the land of Badakhshan, do in fact derive from the neighbouring district of Shughnan, along the right bank of the Panj river, outside Afghan Badakhshan (compare Marco Polo, ed. Latham 1958:76).

27 Herrmann 1968; Potts 1994:199–208. See also Marco Polo, ed. Latham 1958:77.

28 Compare Potts 1994:210.

These lands produce mainly wheat and barley.²⁹ The rest of cultivable land must be irrigated. Even considering the fact that the population of Afghanistan is relatively small, shortage of land is therefore a major problem. Throughout the country the people have for millennia tried to increase the extent of cultivable land by digging canals and, since the first millennium BC, constructing huge networks of underground tunnels, the so-called *ka(h)rez* or *qanât*.³⁰

Most of the cultivated land lies in the southeast, in and around the Qandahar oasis; in the east, in the Kabul valley and around Jalalabad; in the north, around Qunduz and Mazar-i Sharif, and in the west, in the valley of the Hari Rud, around the town of Herat. These are the lands traditionally known for their high agricultural production. In the past, large-scale irrigation networks in Sistan and in the northeast of the country created other centres of human activity, but these have since been destroyed or fallen in disrepair.

Animal husbandry is also widely practised. Sheep, goats and chicken are found in almost every village in the country. The immediate neighbourhood of the villages, however, does not always provide enough food for the animals, and many people move with their herds into the mountains for summer pasturage. Some of them lead the life of full-time pastoralists, always on the move with their herds. Such annual migrations make it possible for the people of Afghanistan to exploit the pastures high up in the mountains and it is yet another way for the Afghans to increase the produce of their land.

Each spring, the nomads and semi-nomads move their herds into the mountains of Central Afghanistan. In the autumn they return to their villages or winter camps. The winter quarters are found in the arid steppes of the southwest and west; in the plains of North Afghanistan; and in the low-lying, warm and monsoon-affected districts along the Pakistan border in the east and southeast of the country. In the southwest and west of the country the nomads are predominantly Durrani Pashtuns, although they are joined by Pashtun Ghaljis, another Pashtun tribal confederacy, who have adopted many aspects of the Durrani, and by other ethnic groups, including Baluch and Aymaqs. Those who winter in the north are often Özbeks and others, including Durrani Pashtuns. The latter are the descendants of those who were forcibly moved from the south in the late nineteenth century. In the west, the nomads are generally Ghalji Pashtuns.

²⁹ Dupree 1980:43.

³⁰ *Qanât* is the Arabic name used in Iran and (western) Afghanistan; *karez* or *kahrez* is the Pashto word.

In 1979, the number of nomads in Afghanistan was estimated at about one to two million people.³¹ Most of these are Pashtuns and Baluch. The nomads and semi-nomads, generally called *Kuchi*³² in Afghanistan, mostly keep sheep and goats. The produce of the animals (meat, dairy products, hair and wool) is exchanged or sold in order to purchase grain, vegetables, fruit and other products of settled life. In this way, an extensive network of exchange has developed along the routes annually followed by the nomads and semi-nomads. The merchant *Powindah* (Ghalji) Pashtuns³³ used to move annually from the Afghanistan mountains to the valley of the Indus and hence deep into India. These long-distance migrations were stopped in the early 1960s when the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan was closed. In recent decades, migrations inside Afghanistan continue, although trucks are now often being used to move livestock and family from one place to the other.

In Afghanistan, the Pashtun and Baluch nomads from the south generally live in black goat hair tents, while most of the non-Pashtun nomads and semi-nomads from the north, following a Central Asian tradition, live in yurts.³⁴ These are circular and framed constructions covered with felt.³⁵ They are portable, normally provided with a domed roof, and are extremely strong. Its basic structure is a lattice framework that constitutes the wall; woolen bands are bound around the wall to keep it together. Their survival into the future is open to question, for they are expensive and take much time to set up, and before the late 1970s their use in Afghanistan was already dwindling.

31 Grötzbach 1990:57. For the nomads of Afghanistan, see the many studies by Klaus Ferdinand and by N. and R. Tapper. See also Jentsch 1973, Glatzer 1977 and Pedersen 1994.

32 The *Fârsi* word *Kuch* refers to a wandering tribe (and robbers).

33 *Powal* is the Pashto verb for 'to graze'. See also Persian *puyidan*, 'to wander', 'to trot.'

34 A more precise term is *Kbergâh* (Dari) or *Uy* (Özbek).

35 For these dwellings, see especially the study by Szabo and Barfield 1991.